



## An Interview With: **Russell Wright**

*Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of  
Dimensions International*

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Russell Wright always knew he'd take over the business his father started in 1985, Dimensions International. When the day finally came in 2003, he took things by the horns. Wright, 38, has grown the government IT contractor from \$60 million in revenue to nearly \$200 million. He also landed on this year's list of finalists for Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year awards. It's the only company he's ever worked for since getting a business degree from Morehouse College. The Columbus, Ga., native recently spoke to Bisnow on Business about the challenges of taking over a family business, and how to motivate employees through company culture.

### **Tania Anderson for Bisnow on Business: What's it like taking over a business from your father?**

He taught me some very hard lessons. Everything that I gained at DI, I truly had to earn. He was harder on me than everybody else. That was painful for me coming up in my early 20s. But it turned out to be a good thing because it taught me to be humble and turned me into a better CEO.

### **What are your biggest current challenges?**

Now that we're doing close to \$200 million, we're competing against bigger companies. They are much more sophisticated than we are. We have to be smart because we don't have the same bandwidth. They have huge amounts of money to put into things, and we don't have that luxury.

### **What kind of changes have you made?**

I did the acquisition of Sentel about two and a half years ago. I moved the company from one location to another. We took off our ties and started going business casual every day and blue jeans on Fridays. We probably work under less pressure. I don't spend a lot of time wondering if people are coming to work. We focus on doing the job and trying to be a family to each other. We have a very low turnover rate because of that.

### **Dimensions International is similar to a lot of other companies in the Washington region. How do you distinguish yourselves?**

We do that via our culture I just described. I try to have an atmosphere where people want to come to work. If employees have kids and they can't go to day care one day, they bring them into the office. Sometimes we'll have three or four kids running around. It's showing the next generation what an office is like. When I grew up in my father's optometry practice, I remember watching the other optometrists, watching the secretaries and accountants process things. That gets you ready for the workplace.

### **How do you describe your culture?**

We don't take ourselves that seriously. We take the job we do very seriously and the clients we serve very seriously. You can win the war without feeling like somebody has a boot on your neck. As a CEO, you have to be vulnerable as well. I never want to be seen as a person who's untouchable. I'm human. I have difficulties like everybody else. And I like to share myself and some of my issues with people like they share them with me.

### **Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?**

Yes, because of what I've been able to do with the business since I took it over. I'm not the truest sense of an entrepreneur because I did not start the business, but I was part of the process over the years. I was a kid when my father started it, but the name came from a math book I had at the time. We were having dinner, and I was doing some math homework. The book had a geometrical shape on the front with a lot of dimensions.

### **Have you always been an entrepreneur or is it something that developed over time?**

I've always had leadership skills. I've always wanted to be in charge. I always, in my mind, wanted to be in the front to some degree. I wanted to take control and be accountable. Those who have leadership capabilities, who know how to motivate others, know how to get the best out of people, I think they can be entrepreneurs. To some degree that can be developed in people, but I do think you're born with much of it.

### **What are some of the best business lessons you've learned?**

You have to be able to make decisions and stand by them. You have to take all the good advice you can get and

then you have to make a decision and stand by your decision. I've made some decisions and they haven't been right, but I've never gone back and blamed anyone else. Also, as you build your team, everybody has to be leaning in the same direction, and then you can accomplish the mission. If you have one person leaning in the opposite direction, it throws your organization into chaos.

**What are some of the biggest mistakes you've made and how did you overcome them?**

Not bidding a piece of work we should have. Not pressing my team enough to get to a better technical approach, a better price. We always sit down as a group and go over what we did right and wrong. Sometimes you have processes that aren't correct, maybe the wrong people are involved. But you can quickly find out what the problem is and then you just need to fix it.

**What's the hardest part of running a tech company these days?**

The technology, because it's changing every day. Being a government contractor, you don't want to follow the government around; you want to meet the government where it's going. You also have to deal with how technology is affecting your own company. There are more people coming through DI who want to telecommute. You have to find a way to have those brains around the table at a moment's notice.

**If you didn't go into the tech business, what would you have done?**

I probably would have been a painter. Art was my true love. I had an art scholarship coming out of high school. But my father told me that it's hard to make money selling art. I used a little common sense and got a business degree.

**What do you see yourself doing in 10 years?**

Hopefully DI will be a billion dollar company. Maybe we'll be public by then. I would like to prove everybody wrong by maintaining a small business culture under a billion dollar umbrella.

**What should someone who just got hired to run a tech company know?**

It's always important to put everything you have into it. I don't think you can be a part-time owner of a business. That's a disaster waiting to happen. You have to be prepared to give up a little bit of your life.